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SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR OCTOBER 14-16 VISIT TO COLOMBIA OF
UNDER SECRETARY OF STATE FOR POLITICAL AFFAIRS WILLIAM J.
BURNS

Summary

¶1. (SBU) Your visit comes as Colombians watch with great interest the U.S. presidential campaign, and speculate on what the outcome of the campaign might mean for U.S.-Colombia relations--especially prospects for Congressional passage of the U.S.-Colombia Trade Promotion Act (CTPA). As a bridge between the outgoing Administration to the new Administration, we expect that the GOC will look to you for guidance on how to maintain and strengthen the historically strong--and bipartisan--ties between the United States and Colombia. The GOC and Colombian people hold strong positive views of the United States, and Colombia sees itself as an unwavering U.S. ally in an Andean region increasingly hostile to U.S. values and goals.

¶2. (U) Colombia in 2008 celebrated major victories in its fight against the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), continued strong economic growth, and an expansion of democratic governance. Increased security has led to an economic boom that has reduced poverty by 20 percent since 2002, cut unemployment by 25 percent, and attracted record levels of investment. Almost 48,000 combatants, mostly paramilitaries, have laid down their arms and are participating in GOC reintegration programs. The captures or kills of key FARC leaders, the bold rescue of 15 high-profile FARC hostages--including three Americans--and rising desertions have weakened Colombia's largest terrorist group. Still, serious challenges remain as Colombia consolidates the progress achieved to date. End Summary.

Successes of Democratic Security Policy

¶3. (U) President Uribe's democratic security policy and free market economic reforms have created a more secure environment and spurred the economy. Since 2002, homicides have decreased by 40% -- its lowest point in twenty years -- while kidnappings have declined by 76%. GDP growth exceeded eight percent in 2007, but is expected to reach a maximum of five percent amid the slowing global economy and financial crisis in 2008. Colombia's trade volume has grown more than 65 percent since 2003. The United States remains Colombia's largest trade partner (accounting for 34 percent of Colombian

exports in 2007, and 26 percent of imports). In 2007, Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) exceeded \$9 billion, more than triple the amount of FDI in 2002.

¶4. (SBU) The GOC has created an interagency body--created the Centro de Coordinacion de Accion Integral (CCAI)--to integrate military, police, and civilian programs in an effort to establish permanent GOC control over areas previously held by the FARC. The USG provided \$13.5 million to support CCAI activities in FY 2007, and plans to provide over \$10 million to support CCAI activities in Meta Department, an area central to the fight against the FARC. CCAI programs suffer from interagency rivalries, but coordination has improved. Though some human rights groups criticize CCAI for failing to involve local officials and civil society in its projects, the project in Meta enjoys strong local support.

Challenges: Strengthening Economy, Security, Democracy

¶5. (SBU) Still, Colombia faces significant challenges as it consolidates the progress achieved to date. Combating inequality, fighting narcotrafficking, and promoting social-economic development will require substantial resources and attention in the years ahead as U.S. assistance is set to decline. The GOC will look for the continued partnership and support of the United States, and will also seek regional allies to help it address these issues.

¶6. (SBU) In its relationship with the United States,

ratification of the CTPA remains the Colombian government's highest economic priority. Analysts estimate the agreement with the United States would add between one and two percent annual GDP growth to the local Colombian economy, adding new jobs and contributing to President Uribe's goal of cutting the poverty rate from 45 percent to 35 percent by 2010. Colombia will also seek continued, but declining, U.S. security assistance as it achieves greater economic growth and social cohesion.

Regional Alliances and Tensions

¶7. (SBU) Colombia continues to ponder its role in the region, but a more secure, prosperous Colombia will play a more assertive role in Latin America and the world. Working with like-minded countries such as Mexico, Peru, and Chile, Colombia will seek to promote greater economic integration through the creation of a web of free trade agreements on the Americas' Pacific Coast. Colombia will avoid ideological confrontation with its Bolivarian neighbor due to their extensive border and economic ties, but we expect Colombia to be a pragmatic advocate for enhanced regional security cooperation and strengthened democratic institutions in the region.

¶8. (SBU) Relations with Venezuela have improved since a July 11 meeting between Presidents Uribe and Chavez, but Venezuelan support for the FARC--as evidenced in the computers found at Raul Reyes' camp--contributes to continued tensions. Ecuador broke diplomatic relations with Colombia after the GOC's March 1 bombing of Reyes' camp in Ecuadorian territory, and has yet to resume ties. President Uribe said he would not attend a mid-October summit meeting of the Andean Community (CAN) in Ecuador to protest recent anti-Colombian statements by Correa.

¶9. (SBU) Colombia also seeks to play a greater role in the international security architecture, as evidenced by its willingness to contribute troops to the NATO effort in Afghanistan and the Sinai Multinational Observer Force. Colombia also provides anti-narcotics training to police in the Caribbean and elsewhere, and Mexico is benefiting from

Colombia's experiences fighting narcotraffickers. We expect the GOC to make available the expertise developed in combating the FARC and narcotrafficking groups for international peacekeeping efforts and other international security activities in the years ahead, although financial constraints will remain an issue.

U.S. Hostages

¶10. (SBU) An audacious Colombian military operation led to the rescue of three U.S. contractors and twelve Colombians held by the FARC. The three Americans were captured by the FARC in February 2003 and were the longest held U.S. hostages in the world at the time of their rescue. The Colombian government worked closely with us on hostage issues, and U.S. training of Colombian military personnel contributed to the operation's success. The FARC continues to hold 25 Colombian "political" hostages, as well as an estimated 700 economic hostages. The FARC is believed to hold a U.S. citizen who was kidnapped in Panama in April 2008, and perhaps a Colombian-American dual national kidnapped in 2003, though it has never provided proof of life.

Human Rights Record

¶11. (SBU) The Uribe Administration continues to make progress on human rights cases involving military abuse or collaboration with criminal groups, but serious problems remain. In October 2006, Defense Minister Santos named the first civilian -- and the first woman -- as director of the Military Criminal Justice System. Santos has strongly backed

initiatives to deter extrajudicial killings, changing promotion criteria to favor demobilization or capture of illegal fighters, and ordering military personnel to facilitate civilian investigations of all combat deaths. Still, human rights groups allege that security forces committed 955 extrajudicial killings over the last five years, and the GOC is investigating new allegations that the military recruited and murdered 23 young men from the Soacha area of southern Bogota in an effort to increase numbers of enemy "kills." All members of the military and police receive mandatory human rights training.

U.S. Assistance

¶12. (SBU) In January 2007 the GOC presented a Plan Colombia "consolidation strategy" pledging a Colombian investment of \$78 billion through 2013. The proposal emphasizes the importance of building social cohesion, and allocates substantial resources to help strengthen local governance, protect human rights, and assist displaced people, Afro-Colombians, and indigenous communities. It also aims to reintegrate almost 48,000 demobilized ex-fighters and deserters and to promote Colombia's licit exports. The GOC seeks funding from the United States and European countries to complement its own resources.

¶13. (SBU) Under Plan Colombia, the USG has provided more than \$5 billion in assistance, including \$800 million in economic and social assistance. USG security assistance combats drug trafficking and terrorism through training, equipment, and technical assistance. It supports Colombian military aviation, essential for all programs -- civilian or military -- outside Colombia's major cities. U.S. social and economic aid focuses on alternative development, displaced and other vulnerable communities, human rights and democratic institutions, and reintegration of demobilized fighters.

Drug Eradication and Interdiction

¶14. (SBU) Eradication of coca and poppy crops and interdiction of cocaine and heroin reached near-record levels in 2007. President Uribe supports greater manual eradication, but recognizes that continued aerial eradication is also key. He seeks a complementary approach using both methods. In 2008, the Colombian National Police and military forces have set a brisk pace for cocaine, coca base and marijuana seizures, and are on pace to set a record. We work with the Colombian government to maximize our scarce resources to achieve the eradication and interdiction targets. We also continue our productive dialogue on how best to transfer key tasks from the USG to the GOC.

Extradition

¶15. (SBU) Since taking office, President Uribe has approved over 750 extraditions to the United States. The Colombian Government has already extradited 168 criminals to the United States in 2008, including 15 former-paramilitary leaders, breaking its 2007 record of 164 extraditions.

Demobilization and Peace Process

¶16. (SBU) Over 32,000 former paramilitaries have demobilized since 2002, and a further 16,000 have deserted from other illegal armed groups (about one-half from the FARC). The Organization of American States (OAS) estimates there are 30 new criminal groups numbering over 3,000 members. The Colombian National Police have the lead in countering these new groups. Under the Justice and Peace Law (JPL) process, many former paramilitary leaders have confessed their participation in violent crimes. To date, the JPL process

has revealed the location of the graves of more than 1,200 paramilitary victims and provided information on 3,600 crimes. Over 120,000 victims have registered under the JPL, with the GOC working on reparation measures. The Supreme Court and the Fiscalía--with GOC support--continue to investigate politicians with alleged paramilitary ties; 70 Congressmen, 28 mayors, and 14 governors have been implicated in the scandal.

¶17. (SBU) The National Liberation Army (ELN) negotiated with the Colombian government for over two years on a cease-fire, but ELN infighting and FARC pressure prevented a deal. The ELN kidnaps civilians to fund its operations, but its military capability is declining. Still, there are no negotiations underway between the GOC and ELN. The FARC has rebuffed GOC overtures to engage in meaningful peace talks, most recently rejecting GOC negotiator Luis Carlos Restrepo's July effort to establish direct talks.

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